

Closing The Gap Series #5
Maturing in Christ
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SLIDE #: Some things in life shouldn't grow: man's stomach. That is enough.

SLIDE #: Some things in life shouldn't grow: marijuana

SLIDE #: Some things in life can't grow: bald man

SLIDE #: Some things in life should grow: like piggy bank

SLIDE #: Some things in life should grow: new puppy

SLIDE #: Some things in life should grow: new baby

Most of you now that Julie and I had a baby who couldn't grow up.

SLIDE #: JESSIE STORY

SLIDE #: TRAGEDY: The Greatest Tragedy In The Christian Church Is The Believer Who Refuses To Grow Up.

Missed the relationship with Jessie. She would be 28: married; grandkids; job career; missed it all.

She died.

Do you know any Christians who started out with God and died? He missed all the relationship.

Some here today. Started with God—stunted.

Our churches are filled with too many baby Christians. Too many Christ Followers are not following Christ on to maturity. Too many settle for too little!

The tragedy is that too many Christians stop growing too soon! They miss the intimate relationship that our eternal Father is dying to have with them.

SLIDE #: Hebrews 5:11-14: We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

SLIDE #: Hebrews 6:1-3: Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead

to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

SLIDE #: Close the Gap series. Can't close the gap if you think you can have an intimate relationship with God without growing spiritually.

Series in BFs and sermons this fall.

SLIDE #: It Is Time To Grow Up. Too Many Christians Remain Mired In The Beginning Levels Of The Journey.

SAM AND GARY ILLUSTRATION

SLIDE #: STAGES: Christians are not all at the same spiritual growth stage—some are more mature—or less mature—than others.

It is important for us to understand that God teaches very clearly that there are several levels of spiritual maturity. We are not all capable of hearing God with the same clarity and discernment. We are not all equally ready to fight the good fight of faith. Some Christian soldiers are ready for front line combat. Unfortunately, some don't even know what their armor and weapons are. Many are still confused about who the real enemy is. Some still seem to be struggling with whether or not they are willing to submit to the Commander in Chief. We're all on different levels of spirituality. It is of the utmost significance that every Christian understand what the Bible teaches about this subject.

SLIDE #:1 John 2: 12-14: And so I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of His name. I write to you, fathers, because you've known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you've overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong and the Word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

John mentioned two characteristics of children, three of a young men and women, and only one of a spiritual mothers and fathers, but that one is twice repeated.

Spiritual children begin the process of spiritual growth when their sins are forgiven. Their personal relationship with God is embryonic. It can be no other way. Spiritual children know who God is; however, they know Him to no depth. Experiencing the initial dimensions of His love, grace and forgiveness are life changing; but, they barely scratch the surface of the deep relationship God has planned for all of His children.

Spiritual young men and women are strong. This may well refer to their growing expertise in exercising the spiritual disciplines which produce great spiritual strength. Next,

they have overcome the Evil One. In other words, they engage in spiritual warfare and win. Finally, the Word of God lives in spiritual young men and women. Of course, the Word of God implies that spiritual young men and women are familiar with the content of the Scriptures, and are adept at applying Biblical truth in leading others farther along in their spiritual journeys. The term also implies that they are cultivating the art of hearing God speak deep in their innermost human spirits. Primarily, however, without a doubt, the “Word of God living within them” refers to a deepening relationship with the Lord Jesus Himself. We know this because John uses the phrase, “Word of God,” to refer to Jesus in both his gospel (John 1:1) and his first epistle (1 John 1:1-4).

Now we move on to the spiritual mother and father stage of maturity. The intimacy at this level so deeply distinguishes a spiritual mother or father that John repeats this phrase twice!

“Him who is from the beginning” suggests the infinite depths of the One who invites us to know Him. While no one will exhaust the depths of God’s heart, spiritual mothers and fathers know Him like few others because of years spent walking closely with Him—experiencing His life, feeling what He feels and even hurting for Him when He hurts.

SLIDE #: God never reveals the deep things of the spirit to the Christians who just drop by for a little chat.

SLIDE #: INTIMACY: Spiritual Maturity Promotes An Increasingly Intimate Relationship With God and others.

Three spiritual levels are enunciated in 1 John 2:12-14: Children, Young Men, Mothers and Fathers.

We see here not just a progression in spiritual growth; we see here a progression in depths of intimacy with God.

The whole idea behind this passage is that God wants to have a relationship with us.

Doesn’t that just scream out to us from this passage?

What does it do to your heart to know that God wants a relationship with you? He wants to be intimate with you.

SLIDE #: I met Julie for the first time Sunday morning in church. She was late—arriving just in time to run to the piano to play and sing before I got up to preach. It was love at first sight. We double-dated that night, and by the time the evening was over our life-long relationship was underway.

If someone had said to me in those first few weeks, “Do you know Julie Tacker?” I might have responded, “Certainly I know her.” The Greek word would be quite appropriate.

Thirty-five-years later not only do I know her, I experience her. would work quite well. I might describe our relationship with intimate terms: "I'm thinking her thoughts. I'm reading her mind. She's thinking my thoughts. She's reading my mind. I know what makes her laugh. I know what makes her cry. I know what she feels like when she lifts her hands and every eye in the orchestra is on her, ready to make music. I know her hopes; I know her hurts. Her needs, her strengths and her weaknesses are open books to me. I intimately know Julie Barrier. She shares my life. She shares my name.

Dallas with Brie and Derrek this week. Derrek and I out to lunch together. Eat somewhere the girls never want to go. CiCi's Buffet, all you can eat pizza.

Told Julie, "I had a salad."

"You also had six pieces of pizza."

"How did you know?"

"I know you.

Spent the last three weeks traveling. "Do you realize that we did not have one fight." Best friends.

Let me illustrate a bit of this intimacy.

God and Abraham. God is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

Then ensues the long discussion with Abraham pleading to save Sodom if 10 righteous men can be found.

SLIDE #: Genesis 18:16-17: "When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"

What would it be like to be so intimate with God that He tells you His secrets. Why did this happen? What is going on in my life?

SLIDE #: image: God uses every experience we have for the good purpose of molding us to look like Jesus.

SLIDE #: Romans 8:28-29: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son ..."

Aunt Susie and teenage Tom.

Molding like sculptor

SLIDE #: Michelangelo's David with colored-on underwear.
Read Irving Stone's The Agony and the Ecstasy

Image has to do with Christlikeness and molding to look like Jesus.

The fruit of the spirit in Galatians 6: love, joy, peace, patience, etc.
Beattitudes: “Blessed are the merciful.

STORY of Ticket counter encounter with man from Dubai.

Out of one hundred departure flights were listed on the big screen at the Zurich airport, only one was cancelled. It was ours. We couldn't believe it! After leading several conferences and taking a few days of vacation, it was time to go home. Now another adventure was to unfold. Fifteen hours of crowded ticket counters and several flights later, we were in Rome for a connecting flight. Twenty-four hours later we were finally on our way back to the States.

The ticket counter in Milan was only one of several nightmare counters along the way. Seventy people crowded relentlessly toward the three overwhelmed agents. Ninety-five minutes later I had pushed and maneuvered my self to the front. I would be next. A young man with a Dubai passport suddenly forced his way through the crowd and stood beside me. I edged in front of the interloper. He smiled and gestured that he would not step in front of me. Then, incredibly, he did. I tapped him on the shoulder and motioned for him to step back. He smiled and acquiesced. “No problem,” he said. Moments later, he maneuvered past me in one unexpectedly slick step and was at the counter.

As anger boiled, I tapped him firmly on the shoulder and said, “Now, that's a problem.” He ignored me.

“Calm down,” I told myself. “He is probably a terrorist and I certainly don't want to anger him. He might have a knife in his pocket.” Those are the kind of thoughts that come from exhaustion and frustration—and the old sin nature.

“I hope he has trouble getting his ticket rerouted.” I said to God. “He deserves it.” There, I felt better. “But, that is stupid, the sooner he is helped, the sooner it will be my turn.” I was about to withdraw my prayer when the young man started hassling with the agent. He could hardly speak English. The airline agent was asking to see his checked baggage claim. She couldn't make his understand.

“I have a baggage claim check right here in my hand. I can help him understand.” But, somehow I enjoyed seeing him suffer. “I wonder what Jesus would do in this situation?” I wondered. Now I felt a little ashamed of myself.

The agent shot me a quick look of gratitude as I showed him my claim check and used hand signals to help him understand. He smiled and produced the ticket; but then paused, stepped back from the counter, smiled and motioned for me to step in front of him in the line. I smiled and declined and motioned for him to continue with the agent. When they finished he turned and stuck out his hand in gratitude. I watched a young, frightened boy walk away to try and find his gate. I gave my confused handful of rerouted airline tickets to the agent. She perused them and said, “I am sorry. You

are at the wrong counter. You need to go down to the ticket counter in 'Terminal C'. After a long sprint and a similar wait we discovered that Milan had two airports. Our flight was scheduled to depart in ninety minutes—from the city airport an hour's taxi ride across town. The agent said, "Run." So, we did.

SLIDE #: God did not bring Christ into our lives solely to forgive our sins and give us a home in Heaven. His desire is that the indwelling Christ might be put on divine display for all the world to see.

SLIDE #: ROAD MAP: We are not left to wonder about the process. God provided a road map for maturity.

SLIDE #: Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it"

SLIDE #: OVERHEAD

SLIDE #: BROKENNESS: Brokenness Is the Process Which Allows Christ To Minister Through Us And Others To See The Christ Who Lives Within Us.

SLIDE #: 2 Corinthians 4:7-11: But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

Once upon a time far off in the heart of the Western Kingdom the master came to walk day by day. In the midst of the garden there in the Western Kingdom was the most beautiful bamboo tree that ever grew in all the earth. The master would come by and look at his plants; but, he had a special affinity for that old bamboo tree. He watched it as it grew. He nurtured it almost to complete maturity.

One day, as the great master was walking through his garden, he came to that bamboo tree, and on impulse that bamboo tree bowed down in loving adoration of his master. The master said, "Bamboo, most beautiful of all the trees in my garden, I think that you're just about ready to become useful to me."

Bamboo said, "Oh, great master, if I can do anything for you, I will. Just take me. Use me." The great master said, "Bamboo, Bamboo, most beautiful of all the trees in my garden, if I'm going to use you I have to cut you down." The wind stopped blowing, and the birds stopped singing and all the butterflies were still.

Then Bamboo said, "Well, master, I'm yours. But, you yourself said that I'm the most

beautiful of all the trees in the garden, must you cut me down?"

"I must, if you're going to be useful to me." The sounds of the garden were hushed in silence as that great bamboo bent his neck, and the master cut him down.

Then the master said, "Bamboo, You're still not useful to me. If you're going to be useful to me I must cut off all your branches."

Bamboo pleaded, "Oh, master, not that. You've already cut me down. Isn't that enough? Please don't cut off my branches."

But, the great master said, "No, I must cut off your branches." Once more the garden was silenced, and all the plants looked on with rapt attention as the great master snipped off branch after branch, and bared that great bamboo.

Then the master said, "Bamboo, you're not useful to me yet. There's one more thing. If you're going to be useful to me, then I must split you open and cut your heart out."

Bamboo wept, "Oh, master, not that! "You've already taken away my beauty. There's nothing left now—just me. Must you scrape my heart out?"

"I must if you're to be useful to me." Once more the garden was hushed as the great master took that bamboo, split him down the middle and scraped his heart out.

Then the great master took that bamboo shoot, now hollowed out and scraped clean, and walked over to a spring which was bubbling with water. He laid one end of that hollowed-out bamboo shoot in the stream. He placed the other end of that bamboo shoot in the irrigation ditch that watered his garden. Then the waters began to flow; and the fields began to grow. The wind began to blow again. The birds began to sing. The rice was planted and the harvest came. And that bamboo who standing all alone in the garden was the most beautiful of all the master's plants, that bamboo, which meant so much to himself, when he was stripped bare, and hollowed out, was then, and only then useful in the great master's garden.

SLIDE #: Job 23:10: "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold"

Father, thank You for Your love, tenderness, and compassion that You share with us. I desire to grow into the spiritual man or woman that You want me to be—bearing Your glory in my everyday living, and having an intimacy with You that transcends all. May I recognize Your hand at work in my life. Please mold me into a spiritual mother or father at any price. Amen.